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ABSTRACT

Although Chinese government policies officially support the equality of the sexes, stereotyped views about the nature of men and women often serve to perpetuate discrimination and to keep women in inferior positions. Women are often segregated into lower paying jobs because of stereotypical views about what is natural for women to do. Despite equal pay laws, Chinese women earn only 71.7% of what men earn. Physiological differences between men and women have been used as justification for certain protections in the workplace such as maternity leave. These protections, however, make women less desirable employees. Although the government has attempted to achieve equality for women through economic emancipation, a viable feminist theory has not been implemanted. Chinese women have achieved success in professional occupations such as medicine, they are portrayed favorably in the media, and they are provided mentor role models by the Women's Federation. Masculinity and femininity are both valued in China and thus women's contributions to management are recognized. The similarities between Chinese managers and North American women managers warrants investigation. (ABL)

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Chinese sex-role conceptions: A double edged sword for women

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

This paper will discuss current Chinese sex-role conceptions and the manner in which these notions about masculinity and femininity influence the lives of women in the workforce. Although Chinese government policies officially support the equality of the sexes, stereotyped views about the nature of men and women often serve to perpetuate discrimination and to keep women in inferior positions.

Since women are perceived to be less competant than men, they are required to achieve higher scores than men on examinations to gain entrance to University and to certain jobs (Croll, 1983). Because women are believed to be more attentive, patient, dexterous and gentle than men (Croll, 1983), it is thought to be more "natural" for them to hold certain positions, such as those of teachers, nurses, and old age home attendants. When we were in China we were informed that these roles were simply not appropriate for men. This stereotyped thinking often results in women being segregated into low paying jobs (Croll, 1983). We observed several examples of this in China, the most striking being when we visited the Qingdao brewery. Men were operating the bottling machines, a higher paying job, while women were doing the quality control work which paid less, although to our eyes these jobs seemed to require equivalent skills. Thus, despite equal pay laws, Chinese women earn only 71.7% of what men do (Wolf, 1985). Furthermore, when women participate in sideline industries, it is usually in traditionally feminine areas such as sewing and handicrafts or as an employee of a male family member (Croll, 1983).

The belief that biology is destiny is alive and well in China. The physiological differences between women and men have been used as a

justification for providing women with certain protections in the workplace, for instance, rest periods during menstruation, pregnancy, and breast feeding and maternity leave during confinement. Although couched in the language of benevolent paternalism, these benefits have been a double-edged sword in that employers often see women as less desirable and productive employees as a result of them (Croll, 1983; Tien, 1986). In addition, menopause is used as a reason to require an earlier retirement age for women than for men. This places limits on women's career advancement and contributes to the fact that they earn lower pensions than men do (Croll, 1983).

Although there is a constitutional committment to sexual equality, the Chinese Communist Party has been unable to eliminate these remnants of feudal thinking or to implement a viable feminist theory (Stacey, 1984). The government's hopes of achieving equality through the economic emancipation of women have met with only limited success in improving the women's status (Croll, 1983). The government has tried to ease the burden of the working woman by providing her with support services in the areas of child care and meal preparation. However, allowing women as a group special privileges has only served to highlight the differences between women and men.

This same dilemma is currently being confronted by feminists in North America. However, they have adopted the opposite strategy in dealing with it- that of denying the existence of any differences between men and women (particularly those with physiological underpinnings) in their attempt to attain sexual equality. The result has been that North American women find themselves without adequate

support services, sinking under the weight of the double burden and no closer to the goal of equality with men than their sisters in China.

The picture in China is not all bleak. There are several areas in which Chinese women have the advantage over those in North America. "In university teaching, in scientific research, in medicine, in management, the percentages of Chinese women employed are higher than in the United States." (Tien, 1986, pg. 12). Furthermore, the Chinese government, in an attempt to counter pervasive sexist images of women, is committed to seeing that women are portrayed favorably and non-stereotypically in the media (Tien, 1986). In addition, the Women's Federation provides a source of mentors and a setting which encourages the development of leadership abilities (Croll, 1983). Thus, one might surmise that Chinese women have more access to achievement-oriented role models than North American women do.

In addition, due to differences between the cultures, Chinese working women do not have to contend with some of the negative effects of rigid sex-typing that have plagued their sisters in North America. In two areas in particular, those of attributional and leadership styles, the Chinese experience is best relayed in contrast to that which curently exists in North America.

A frequently noted sex difference in North American populations is that males make more internal, stable (ability) attributions for success, whereas females are more likely to attribute their successes to external and/or unstable factors such as effort or luck. These differences are thought to result from women's internalization of

society's belief in their lack of competance on male-oriented tasks and may serve to inhibit women's achievement in male-dominated areas.

We expected to observe this same sex difference in China. In fact, we did find that our sample of Chinese women managers consistently made effort attributions to explain their success. We were surprised, however, when the males we interviewed also attributed their success to effort rather than to ability. In China hard work is considered virtuous and it is unseemly to tout one's own competance. It is interesting that Gould and Stone (1982) have explained the tendency of females in North America to use effort rather than ability attributions as being due to their trying to avoid self-presentations which appear immodest rather than to a lack of belief in their own ability. However, because in North America this self-depreciating strategy is part of the feminine sex role, women who use it do appear less competant than men. In China, on the other hand, because self-presentational modesty is culturally appropriate for both men and women, women employing this strategy do not suffer in comparison with men.

Another difference between China and North America is in the leadership styles used by men and women. In North America both male and female managers use a task-oriented style of leadership and tend to neglect social-emotional skills (Schein, 1973). Since this style is associated with the traditional masculine sex role, it means that North American women must supress their femininity and behave like men in order to be successful in the business world (Korabik, 1982). Both the men and the women managers who we interviewed in China reported using an androgynous leadership style which combined instrumentality and

expressiveness. North American corporations are only now beginning to realize that this is the ideal style of leadership and to recognize the importance of feminine qualities for effective management (Sargent, 1983).

In light of the continued importance of traditional sex roles in China as discussed in the first part of this paper, the tolerance of expressiveness in Chinese organizations appears puzzling. There are two factors which may be responsible for this apparent paradox. First, Chinese culture is based on the norm of collectivism in contrast to the individualism of North American societies. Collectivistic cultures value a group orientation, cooperation, and social bonding (Kim, 1986). Secondly, dialectical conceptions of sex role (i.e., yin/yang) are part of the Chinese historical tradition. In our Western conceptions, these take the form of androgyny where the integration of masculinity and femininity is within the individual. However, the Chinese don't have a similar concept of individual personality (Kim, 1986), so for them such integration would take place in the work or family unit. Although this generally means that men are expected to play the masculine role and women are relegated to the feminine role, both masculinity and femininity are valued and considered necessary and important by the culture. Thus, women's contributions to management may be more readily recognized in China than they are in North America. Furthermore, Chinese women's similarity to men in attributional and leadership style may facilitate their acceptance into the institutional structure. In light of our findings that both Chinese men and women managers are more similar in style to North American women than they are to North

American men, it is interesting to note that a recent article in the popular press (Lynden, 1985) reports that the Chinese would rather do business with North American women than with North American men. Further research should be addressed to this issue.

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